

**Mark 4: 30-34; “Greater than all the Herbs”, Sermon # 25 in the series
“Astonished at His Teaching”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on
October 12th, 2014, in the Morning Worship Service.**

We continue on our journey through these parables of the Lord Jesus which are found in Mark. There does appear to be a progression in these parables. The first; the parable of the sower, speaks about the different kinds of ground, of the human heart, which the seed of the Word of God falls upon. The focus is the heart receiving the word and what that will mean in terms of fruit to God. Three kinds of ground are unfruitful and thus are proved to be unbelievers; one of the soils is good ground which brings forth, some 30, some 60, and some 100 fold. The second parable is the one of the seed growing up secretly, and it speaks of the gradual progression of the life of grace, the life of Christ in the believer. The believer does not grow up into maturity in a moment, but rather “bears fruit with patience”. The focus of this parable is each individual believer who receives these life-giving influences of grace, learning to become mature; taking the initiative in his Christian life to “yield crops by himself.” This does not mean that he does anything truly spiritual or good, apart from the life of Christ working within him. But it does mean that he learns to take the initiative to act in obedience to the commands of the Bible, as he hears them preached to him by his pastor, and he deliberately goes about to bear fruit unto God. He is not lazy or careless about his Christianity. He is not interested in drifting through life, flowing with the stream of the world’s view of things. He will deliberately cultivate the ground of his heart in order that crops may be grown for God.

Now, this final parable of this grouping is speaking of the growth of the kingdom of God. Here our Lord is telling us about the small beginning and the great ending of the plant of the Christian life, and also about the same in regard to the true Church of Jesus Christ. Both have their start from the life and work of Jesus Christ. Both, seemingly, have small beginnings. But what they turn out to be, in what they progress to and where they end up in their growth, is very great indeed. This is what we want to consider this morning. I want to draw from the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke while I do this exposition. And so listen carefully while I 1st tell you about the man who sowed the seed and where he sowed it. Then 2nd – I want to say some things about the growth of this mustard plant. And then 3rd – I want to speak to you about the birds that come to nest in the branches of this tree that it grows into.

1st – Let me tell you about the man who sowed the seed and where he sowed it.

In the gospel of Mark there is no man mentioned as sowing the seed. His relation of the parable assumes what has gone before, in the two parables that have preceded this one, and no mention is made of the man directly. But turn over with me to the gospel of Matthew, chapter 13, verse 31. It says here, “Another parable He put forth to them saying: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.” And now turn over to the gospel of Luke, chapter 13, verses 18 and 19. It says, “Then He said, ‘What is the kingdom of God like?’ ‘And to what shall I compare it?’ ‘It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches.’” There are some things added in these two passages to what we find in Mark. I believe that when we think about this “man” that sowed this mustard seed, that we can safely continue our interpretation of the other two parables that we have studied, and bring him into this one as well. In the primary sense, once again, we can say that the “man” here is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He is the One who not only sowed the seed of the word of God in His ministry here upon the earth, but He is the One who is Himself the seed who is the mustard seed of the whole kingdom of God. In the

gospel of Mark, we are not told specifically where this mustard seed is sown. It just says that the seed is sown on the ground. The ground is certainly the ground of men's hearts. But for that seed to have life in itself, for it to be the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, we need to understand what the Lord Jesus had to do, all by Himself, without any help from any man, so that His whole kingdom would be planted and grow.

Turn with me to John 12, verse 20. "Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the fest." "Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'" "But Jesus answered them, saying, 'The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified.'" "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain." The Lord Jesus was speaking of His own death. His life had been a complete and total success in the eyes of God, even though He was being rejected by men. His obedience would be an obedience unto death; even the death of the cross. He was speaking of His sowing His life as a seed in death on behalf of His Church, for everyone who would believe in Him for everlasting life. Unless Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised from the dead, He would remain alone. He would still have been the Son of God; He still would have been the Lord of glory, but He was willing chose to become the Son of Man so that we could be the good ground that the seed of His word was sown upon. Certainly Jesus is not the least of the seeds in terms of His person. He is the greatest of all men by far. He is the Son of God as well as the Son of Man. But the seed is the least of all the seeds in the sense that His kingdom is considered by men to be the least of all the kingdoms, and it started out very small. It is least of all the seeds in that out of the death of this one valuable Man would come the salvation of an innumerable multitude of men, women, and children. Have you ever yet believed in the Son of God and the Son of Man, the One who assumed human nature, just like yours except without sin? Have you ever yet seen that it was absolutely necessary for Him to do this; to suffer and to die, and to be buried in the ground; His life being planted as a seed, so that you might not suffer eternally? Do you see that He also had the power to "take His life up again"? To Jesus Christ belongs all the power and the glory of your salvation if you have trusted in Him. And if you have not believed in Him to this very day, you may believe in Him now and have everlasting life for the asking.

Now 2ndly - I want to say some things about the growth of this mustard plant.

(Verse 32)

The mustard seed, "when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches." We need to recognize, as we did in the other parables, that "the man" in this parable also includes all those preachers "in Christ" who share the mustard seed of the gospel, which is the preaching of Christ Himself. The preachers of the gospel, in all the generations of the church, are also to be thought of as being a part of this "man's" work force; those who help in the sowing this seed. In Matthew's rendition of this parable, when the man sowed the mustard seed, he sowed it in his field. In Luke's parable when he sowed the mustard seed, he sowed it in his garden. What started out in the sowing of Himself in "the ground", in His death, came forth as a wonderful strong plant that would become greater than all the herbs because of His resurrection. It is by this resurrection power that the gospel is preached to all the nations by the men appointed and called by Christ to do the work. Thus, the mustard seed which Christ planted in the "field", He causes also to grow up in the field of the world.

Those who believe in the word of the gospel, He plants them in churches; He plants them in the garden of His cultivation; His church. There, the preachers of the gospel preach the word and by this means the plant grows. His "garden" grows up into a mighty plant in the implications of each individual's salvation and in the kingdom's growth in many churches world-wide. And this garden, the Universal Church, grows up over many generations through many additions to it, to become greater than all other herbs. It may have many branches but it is still

one tree. It may have many denominations, but that is part of her strength. The Church and the truth that she preaches, grows up to be greater than all the philosophies and philosophers of this world. It becomes greater yet, and grows up to overtake and put to shame all the attempts of man to make up his own religion. All the religions devised by men will ultimately be defeated in their designs and their schemes because they are not from God. They are not from God and so they will perish. This is why you and I ought not to be afraid to speak against all false religions. They are all like the herbs in their growth. People who believe in false doctrines of salvation and engage in false religions are like the herbs and their religions are like herbs. There is no everlasting life in them.

Herbs, the Dictionary says are “A plant having a soft or succulent stalk or stem, that dies to the root every year, and is thus distinguished from a tree and a shrub, which have ligneous, or hard, woody stems.” “The word “herb” comprehends all the grasses and everything grown for the use of food.” Herbs are those plants which grow strong for a season and then they wither and die. But the mustard seed of the Middle Eastern countries grows up into a strong big tree. It becomes woody where other herbs don't. In other words, what makes the Christian religion different from all other religions of the world is that it has the principle of the living grace of God and Christ within it. It does and it will grow up to be greater than all the other religions in the world. Even if it does not appear to be so now, the living principle of the truth of Christ's grace, His life planted in His people's lives, grows up in their souls, and it produces a mighty change in them. They become righteous. They become holy. They grow up to a Biblically moral, God-honoring maturity by feeding upon the word of God. They learn to love God and keep His Word. They live and do all that they do by faith in their living Lord and His living word. All who believe in Jesus, and understand this principle of truth, and live by it, will become His fruitful plants. Before the end of the world, before Christ returns, multitudes of people will come to be a part of this mustard seed plant of the Church through His saving and converting grace. They will feed upon the principles, promises, and precepts of the Word of God and the Church will grow up into Christ.

The growth of this plant refers to the growth of Christ's church, but the Church does not grow up by additions to it except through the preaching of the word, which is done by Christ's preachers, and those who are faithful to share the truth with others. Christ builds his church by means of faithful men and women, such as will live out and share the truth of the word of God and the gospel to others. The gospel of Christ, which is a mustard seed coming forth from his own hand, is sown in his field; the field representing the whole world. Christ intended that the gospel and His blessed word would go the ends of the earth. His kingdom, which just started out with a few men and women praying in an upper room after He had ascended up to heaven, would grow to become the greatest kingdom in all the world. It started out small, but as it has grown, it has multiplied to thousands and eventually to millions, and I would say, eventually billions of people will be saved before the Lord returns. It is a great and mighty plant with many branches. In fact in Luke's gospel it is said that this plant “grew and became a large tree.” The mustard seed, which started out as such a small seed, grew up to become a large tree.

This leads me to say that there is a principle of life and growth that is at work in the growth of this great tree that is also to be found in the feeblest believer. It is the principle of the power of Christ's life working within us, creating and building faith in Himself, and the truth that every Christian will be able to grow and make real progress in their faith because of Christ's grace and obeying His truth. How does this principle of the mustard seed apply to our individual lives practically? Turn over to Luke 17, verse 1, and you will see. There are going to be offenses in the Christian life. And these offenses will threaten to destroy all of the good that we are trying to do for Christ. People sin against us and they offend us. It says here, “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do

come!” “It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.” “Take heed to yourselves.” “If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.” “And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent’, you shall forgive him.” “And the apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith.’” “So the Lord said, ‘If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” It takes mustard seed faith to go forward in the Christian life after you have been offended, in order to bear fruit for God. The mustard seed being small, very small; it is not the size of our faith that counts; it is whether we will exercise what faith we do have, and watch it grow more in relation to our obedience. It grows more by our being obedient to do what the Lord commands us to do, and going to the person who has offended us and to deal with the matter that is bothering us. You say to me, “But what if he does not repent?” “Do I still forgive him?” Well, hold on to that question. I will answer it in a few minutes.

Turn with me over to Mark 11 and verse 12. Jesus had finished His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. There were many of His disciples there, who witnessed that fulfillment of Scripture which testified that He was indeed the Christ. But there were still many among the Jews, especially their leaders, who did not believe. And here, Jesus is about to teach His disciples a lesson of practical faith. “Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry.” “And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it.” “When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.” In response Jesus said to it, ‘Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.’” “And His disciples heard it.” Now skip down to verse 20. “Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots.” “And Peter, remembering said to Him, ‘Rabbi, look!’” “The fig tree which You cursed has withered away.” “So Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Have faith in God.’” “For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.’” “Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.”

Now as we come to apply these words to ourselves, let us understand that you and I, if we are Christians, we are those who should want to see great things done for Christ’s kingdom. We are those who are intent on promoting His glory and serving him with all of our hearts. But sometimes there are things in our hearts; sins that we might toy with or tolerate, that form real obstacles to the forward progress of our becoming mature and pleasing to the Lord. There may also be the sin of unbelief there, because of what other people may have done to us. There it may be an unforgiving spirit. And we should also understand that sometimes there are real obstacles from without; sinful and unbelieving people who take steps to oppose us in our quest to see truth and righteousness prevail in our society and in the communities that we represent. What are we to do, to go on to fulfill all the good purposes which the Lord has called us to work toward; the forward progress of holiness, and righteousness and truth? We cannot curse the fig tree like Jesus did. We do not have the authority that our Lord does. We are to bless those who curse us. We are called to love our enemies. Our Lord Jesus knows all about these things.

Concerning the forces which are outside of ourselves, we must understand that the Lord Jesus can and He will deal with them according to our faith and according to our prayers, in connection with His purposes. We can learn to pray and exercise faith in God. “Have faith in God!”, Jesus says. We can pray and believe and ask God for the removal of the obstacles of difficulty which are hindering His cause from going forward. And then concerning the internal obstacles. The Lord had come looking for fruit on this fig tree and He found none. This fig-tree had wonderful, flourishing green leaves on it, and even though it was not the season for it to

bear, still He expected fruit. The fig tree represents the Jewish nation at that time. Jesus however, was looking for something to eat, and since He could not have it from this tree, He cursed it. We should understand that our God and our Christ are always looking for fruit from our lives, in every season of our lives. We may not be thinking about Christ's expectations. It may not seem possible to us to bear fruit in certain seasons of our life. But our time is always now. If we are trusting in Christ, we do have the power. Now is the day of salvation; now is the time for repentance. Repentance and faith are expected from Christians in every season. And you and I must have good fruit appear; not in order to be converted or to be saved from our sins, but to show forth the truth of our confession of faith in God and Christ. We cannot merely have good looking leaves. Fruit must come as the evidence of life, or we will perish because we really have no life if we have no fruit.

Look at verses 25 and 26 and you will see a practical example of this which follows. "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." This section here, unlike Luke 17, says that you should forgive if you have anything against anyone. It is a lack of forgiveness and an unwillingness to, by faith, go beyond whatever has troubled you about the person that you have something against, that prevents you from bringing glory to God, and growing to maturity in relation to your faith. You need to say to this mountain, "Be removed and be cast into the sea." "Do not doubt" that these obstacles can be removed. Whatever you pray for that is in line with the revealed will of God in His word, believe that you will receive it, and it shall be granted to you. This is mustard seed faith. The plant starts out very small. But it grows up and becomes greater than all the herbs and shoots out large branches. This is because of the power of the word, accompanied by Christ's Spirit. The gospel becomes the power of God unto salvation.

Then finally - I want to speak to you about the birds that come to nest in the branches of this tree that it grows into. (Verse 32)

"...But when it is sown, the mustard seed grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade." It is difficult to determine who these birds ultimately refer to. But let us attempt to understand it. In the parable of the Sower, you find that the "birds of the air" were some of Satan's emissaries who came during and after the word was preached, and they took away the word that was sown in their hearts. To be consistent with that parable we should interpret these birds of the air in the same way. The kingdom of God grows up to such a great tree that even false ministers are able to take refuge in the shade of it. Yes, it has been true in the history of the Church. But I think that if we can see the false teacher and the false professor finding refuge in the shade of the true plant, that the true plant, the true kingdom of Christ, must indeed be very great. If this is so, then let us pray for those winged messengers of the gospel who are sent to preach. Let us pray for each person who will boldly and plainly share the gospel of Christ, and let us see the importance of the local church. It is in the shadow of this plant that all good men will make their efforts to promote the gospel and the word of God. Some birds will rest in the branches of what Christ has done through men in past generations. And yet they will make no efforts to promote what is doctrinally sound, or morally good and true, themselves. By the promotion of their own false doctrine and lifestyle they show themselves to be false brethren. All who would be faithful and true to Christ will make good efforts to spread the gospel of Christ in connection with a church of which they have become a member. And these will be sincere Christians who will not only till the garden of their own soul, but they will also look outside of themselves to seek to work in the garden larger garden of the Lord, in missions and evangelism. I like the words of Spurgeon on this:

“Further, in this little parable we notice that this man had a garden: ‘Like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and cast into his garden.’ Some Christian people have no garden — no personal sphere of service. They belong to the whole clan of Christians, and they pine to see the entire band go out to cultivate the whole world, but they do not come to personal particulars. It is delightful to be warmed up by missionary addresses, and to feel a zeal for the salvation of all the nations; but, after all, the net result of a general theoretic earnestness for all the world does not amount to much. As we should have no horticulture if people had no gardens, so we shall have no missionary work done unless each person has a mission. It is the duty of every believer in Christ, like the first man, Adam, to have a garden to dress and to till. Children are in the Sunday-schools by millions: thank God for that! But have you a class of your own? All the church at work for Christ! Glorious theory! Are you up and doing for your Lord? It will be a grand time when every believer has his allotment, and is sowing it with the seed of truth. The wilderness and the solitary place will blossom as the rose when each Christian cultivates his own plot of roses. Where should this unnamed man sow his mustard seed but in his own garden? It was near him, and dear to him, and to it he went. Teach your own children, speak to your neighbors, seek the conversion of those whom God has especially entrusted to you.”

Brethren, if we can build our nests upon one of the branches of this tree, and we have; then can we not also till the garden which he has placed us in? I think that by His grace, we can.